

FREE PREVIEW!

of Rekesha Pittman's upcoming 2015
book release

Of Them That Danced: Moving Through the Scriptures.

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book is being finalized for printing.

This book is my most exciting work to date!
This is one of sixteen chapters. Let's go
deeper into the study of dance in 2015.

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CHAPTER TWO

Of Them That Danced:

MIRIAM

Students of Christian dance are largely familiar with this woman who danced with a timbrel in her hand. If there were a “Hall of Fame” for dancers in the Bible, Miriam would probably have been inducted into it. Biblical studies will identify this instance of dance in Exodus 15:20 as “The Law of First Mention,” which documents the first time that this word was used in the Bible and provides a basis from which further studies can be compared and contrasted. The Scriptural account is as such:

“And Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances.” – Exodus 15:20

From this account, we can gather several significant details. Miriam was a prophetess, which meant that she had a voice that was used by God to communicate with His people and she was a female in position of public leadership. Being the sister of Aaron also identifies her as the sister of Moses, the leader of the Israelite people out of the bondage of slavery under Egyptian rule. Miriam placed an instrument in her hand, a timbrel, which was routinely used to accompany song and dance in the Bible. An often overlooked detail is that all of the women followed Miriam with timbrels and dances (and not a small number of them!). They were not passive observers, but active participants in the dance. In modern times, this would designate Miriam as the official dance ministry leader. Using dance in the plural form would also suggest that there was more than one dance presented or more than one type of dance being done simultaneously.

Further study of Exodus 15 reveals a larger backdrop from which to learn about the significance of this dance. The beginning of Exodus Chapter 15 resounds with a song:

“Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, and spake, saying, I will sing unto the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.” – Exodus 15:1

“And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.” – Exodus 15:21

Here we witness a type of “call and response” tradition in which the song went forth from Moses and the children of Israel, and the response to the song was agreement through dancing and singing by the larger community of women. Throughout many of the Old Testament Scriptures, we discover that lyrical singing, dancing, and musical instrumentation are often closely linked together. Many dancers in the church today have followed this same pattern by dancing to pre-recorded songs (lyrics and instruments) and moving in conjunction with live praise and worship teams (singers, musicians, and dancers) in regular church services and on special programs.

As protocol would dictate, men returning from victorious battle would often be greeted with songs and dances by women of ancient times. (This trend of continuity can also be seen with professional sports teams and cheerleaders and dancers that cheer them on with song and dance). In this case, Pharaoh’s army was defeated in the midst of the Red Sea as the surrounding waters enclosed both men and horses to the sentence of death. Post-battle celebration ensued, as was customary and expected.

Students of biblical dance must take a deeper look at Miriam to learn valuable lessons regarding her life and leadership to get a more complete understanding. It may come as a surprise to

many that Miriam's name is derived from the Hebrew word **Miryam** (Strong's #4813), meaning rebelliously. The root word for Miryam in Hebrew is **meriy** (Strong's #4805), which means bitterness.

Although Miriam is often celebrated by dancers for being a heroine of Biblical dance, we must also take note of the need to stay humble before the Lord, or we too may find ourselves ensnared by rebellion. In Numbers Chapter 12, Miriam and Aaron verbally criticized Moses for his marriage to an Ethiopian woman. As a prophetess, Miriam asserted her assurance that the Lord spoke to her as well as Moses. The Lord Himself responded to the dispute and clearly distinguished that He spoke to Moses face to face and not in visions, dreams, or dark sayings (as He spoke to traditional prophets). As a result of her lack of reverence for Moses, she became leprous. Moses, her brother and spiritual leader, interceded for her healing. Although God answered the request, Miriam still had to remain separated from the people for seven days after her affliction.

Dancers in the church arena who are not careful can become guilty of operating out of rebellion. Those who serve in positions of leadership must exercise special caution. Miriam's sin was impactful for several reasons. As a leader of influence, her outspoken criticism could have resulted in division among the people. Because she was a prophetess, God provided revelation through Miriam as He still does with many prophets today. Those in the ministry of movement must realize that although God may impart a specific message to deliver, it is not always appropriate or timely to leap into operation.

Many dancers can fall into the trap of rebellion through the root of bitterness. This may stem from hurtful relationships with church leaders, conflicts with fellow members in ministry, unresolved family issues, personal struggles, or lack of understanding concerning God's Word. Some praise dance groups are formed out of perceived rejection or lack of acceptance by

leadership. Although many ministries outside of the local church congregation may be ordained of God, care must be taken to establish ministries in righteousness and not rebellion. Waiting for the Lord's revelation is always better than running ahead of His instruction.

Accepting a position of leadership must not be taken lightly. Dance leaders who misuse their God-given influence can easily fall into sin and cause others to be affected by the error. Miriam's public punishment hindered the progress of the children of Israel for seven days! It is no doubt that this also affected her credibility as a leader in the eyes of the people, considering that lepers were outcasts in the community as being unclean. Although Moses' cry to God granted her healing, Miriam still had to suffer the penalty for openly challenging the Man of God.

Not all dancers are leaders by title, but standing in front of a group of people makes all who stand in front, in essence, leaders. Many disagreements and lack of unity can be traced to petty complaints, idle talk, malicious gossip, and the feeling of co-equality with leaders that many exhibit today. The concept of leadership has been somewhat diminished by public scandal and broken trust by leaders in both the local church assembly and larger Christian community. Like Moses, leaders must have a close relationship with God and be called by Him for the task. Like Miriam, those who misuse their positions will ultimately pay the price for rebellious behavior. Although Miriam's death was recorded in Numbers Chapter 20, a sobering reminder was given to the children of Israel in the Book of Deuteronomy:

“Remember what the LORD thy God did unto Miriam by the way, after that ye were come forth out of Egypt.”

– Deuteronomy 24:9

Miriam's example was the first time that dance was mentioned by name expressly, but this does not necessarily mean that it was the first instance of dancing being done historically. It is

noted in Exodus 15:20 that all of the women followed after Miriam with timbrels and with dances. Unlike many instances of dance in the church today, we see dance here as a communal effort and normal way of life. In the custom of folk dance of Biblical times, men and women danced separately. Since we are aware that thousands upon thousands of people were present at the crossing of the Red Sea, we can only imagine how large the group of women was that danced with Miriam! In order to dance in a safe and organized fashion of any kind, we can also conclude that there were certain combinations that had to be learned or followed in order to keep step in the process.

Acknowledging that the dance is mentioned first through the efforts of Miriam, let's take a closer look at the instrument that she used to study further history of the standards of Biblical dance. Remember how we reviewed the origin of movement in the opening verses of Genesis? We also find another interesting artifact there as well:

“Wherefore didst thou flee away secretly, and steal away from me; and didst not tell me, that I might have sent thee away with mirth, and with songs, with tabret, and with harp?” – Genesis 31:27

Sound familiar? According to Strong's #8596, the Hebrew word used here is **toph**, meaning a tambourine, tabret, or timbrel! This would count as the first mention of tabrets (or timbrels) in the Scriptures. The origin of the word timbrel comes from the Hebrew word **taphar** (Strong's #8609) meaning to sew, or women that sew together. Further defined regarding its usage is **taphaph** (Strong's #8608), a Hebrew word meaning to drum, play as on the tambourine: taber, play with timbrels. According to Gesenius' Lexicon, “A timbrel is a drum beaten in the East by women when dancing; it is made with a wooden circle, covered with a membrane and furnished by brass bells.”

Notice in the text that songs and mirth (gladness with laughter), were listed along with the timbrel. In this context, Laban is speaking to Jacob who left with his wives (Laban's daughters) without his foreknowledge. Laban is implying that he would have sent Jacob off with a celebration that might have very well included dances with timbrels. Although we cannot cite this as an instance of dance by name, the use of timbrels with music and celebration was common in Old Testament times.

The timbrel and tabret were utilized in the dance, during prophecy, with other instruments, and in battle. Let's examine several passages that highlight this instrument and its importance:

“After that thou shalt come to the hill of God, where is the garrison of the Philistines: and it shall come to pass, when thou art come thither to the city, that thou shalt meet a company of prophets coming down from the high place with a psaltery, and a tabret, and a pipe, and a harp, before them; and they shall prophesy: And the Spirit of the LORD will come upon thee, and thou shalt prophesy with them, and shalt be turned into another man.”

– 1 Samuel 10:5-6

This account happened shortly after Saul was anointed by Samuel, before he was installed as king. In this case, Samuel instructed Saul that he would meet a group of prophets with various instruments along his journey, of which included the tabret. Here we observe prophecy being used in conjunction with music. In Christian dance, there is a growing segment of “prophetic dancers” that use music along with movement and, at times, audible words to prophesy and deliver a message directly from God, usually conducted in the presence of a congregation.

Later in 1 Samuel, we see the tabret used with song, dance, and instruments:

“And it came to pass as they came, when David was returned from the slaughter of the Philistine, that the women came out of all cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet king Saul, with tabrets, with joy, and with instruments of musick.” – 1 Samuel 18:6

With Miriam’s example, as well as the tradition of women to greet the returning victor from battle, we can picture multitudes of women going forth in the dance intertwining song with musical instrumentation. Not only did these women dance, they were singers and musicians as well!

From this emerged another reaction known to accompany the dance: **envy**. King Saul was ruling at the time and David was serving in Saul’s court. Returning from the slaughter of the Philistine, the women came out to greet King Saul (not David, his servant), but sang a song in Saul’s presence that made the King look inferior in front of his entourage:

“And the women answered one another as they played, and said, Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands. And Saul was very wroth, and the saying displeased him; and he said, They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands: and what can he have more but the kingdom? And Saul eyed David from that day and forward.”

- 1 Samuel 18:7-9

We will discuss more about the community of women that danced as well as David in our later studies, but we can clearly see the similarity between Miriam and the history of the dancers that followed in her footsteps through the incorporation of song, instruments, and dance as a community effort.

Moving forward into 2 Samuel, we see the tabret as a continued part of the praise celebration:

“And David and all the house of Israel played before the LORD on all manner of instruments made of fir wood, even on harps, and on psalteries, and on timbrels, and on cornets, and on cymbals.” - 2 Samuel 6:5

David has his heart set on bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the City of David, so he gathered the people together to help him celebrate. We then read about a large gathering of musicians playing instruments, including timbrels. Note that this was the first time that David attempted to bring the Ark of God into the city, but was unsuccessful at doing so as God was not consulted about the proper order. If we were to take a sneak peek at the second attempt to bring the Ark to the place that David had prepared for it, we see that it was accompanied by the dance of the king (2 Samuel 6:14)! Although 2 Samuel 6:5 does not explicitly state that dance accompanied the parade of the Ark, we would probably be surprised if dance was excluded in the first attempt to transport the Ark of the Covenant.

The presence of the tabret did not always indicate that the work of the Lord was in progress:

“And the harp, and the viol, the tabret, and pipe, and wine, are in their feasts: but they regard not the work of the LORD, neither consider the operation of his hands.”

-Isaiah 5:12

This was the judgment pronounced upon impurity among the people. As Miriam experienced a time of judgment and the resulting impurity of leprosy, those who take on the form of celebration to the exclusion of the One to be honored will be operating in vain.

Dancers who dedicate themselves to the Lord's service half-heartedly are placing themselves in danger of judgment. This warning is not limited to the novice dancer, but to the veteran as well. Positioning oneself based on titles, experience, and good

intentions is not what the Lord uses as qualifiers. Obedience is the order of the day and required of the Lord. We see this judgment continue in the Book of Isaiah:

“The mirth of tabrets ceaseth, the noise of them that rejoice, the joy of the harp ceaseth.” – Isaiah 24:8

This sentence not only affected the people (as it did with Miriam) but extended to the land as well. Because of the sin of the people, the gladness of the tabrets was absent from the streets, along with its usual accompaniments. For the dancer, this could represent a local church being affected by sin in the dance ministry or congregation that causes the dance ministry to be put on hiatus or removed from church services altogether. Dancers desiring to move according to truth must proceed with caution on a regular basis!

The prophet Nahum describes the victorious armies of God and the penalty that will be paid for those who suffer defeat:

“And Huzzab shall be led away captive, she shall be brought up, and her maids shall lead her as with the voice of doves, tabering upon their breasts.” – Nahum 2:7

Instead of a joyful song and dance with tambourines, those who oppose the Lord will experience mourning and the absence of celebration. Instead of striking the timbrel with their hands lifted, the beating of the chest in lament awaits those who become enemies of righteousness. Dancers who want to remain in the will of the Lord must be set apart for His service and clearly identified as His people.

Thankfully, the story of the tabret does not end in judgment! The Lord Himself selects it as instrumental in battle:

“And in every place where the grounded staff shall pass, which the LORD shall lay upon him, it shall be with

tabrets and harps: and in battles of shaking will he fight with it. – Isaiah 30:32

Amazingly, the Lord uses a tabret! The preceding verses in Isaiah 30 describe a very visual recording of a song accompanied by musical instruments and describes how the Assyrian would be beaten down through the voice of the Lord. Keeping with the theme of the returning victor and responding through dance, many Christian dancers employ what is known as “warfare dance” during group gatherings and for personal use. Warfare dance is often very aggressive, strategic, and loud! It is usually done to upbeat music that includes instruments, percussion, and declarative lyrics.

Even though dancers like Miriam faced challenges along the journey, it is encouraging to know that the Lord is in the restoration business as we see in the Book of Jeremiah:

“Again I will build thee, and thou shalt be built, O virgin of Israel: thou shalt again be adorned with thy tabrets, and shalt go forth in the dances of them that make merry.” – Jeremiah 31:4

Yet again we see the pattern set, as with Miriam, of tabrets or timbrels and dancing operating in conjunction. The Word is consistent in its depiction of the use of the timbrel or tabret, dance, singing, and musical instruments being used as a public response to and celebration of victory. It was often a community effort and embraced by vast numbers of women, Miriam of whom is the most remembered. As a general reminder of the importance of all of these elements working together, we read in the Book of Psalms that:

“The singers went before, the players on instruments followed after; among them were the damsels playing with timbrels.” – Psalm 68:25

The Word always takes precedence whether demonstrated visually or experienced audibly. For Christian dancers, the mission should not be one that highlights creativity taking precedence above the Creator. The singers were at the forefront, meaning that the message must be heard to be clear. Following behind the lyrics are the musicians, who must be careful not to overshadow the Word with vigorous playing or magnified volumes that will mask the meaning intended. If dancers are not mindful, songs may be selected based on rhythm that is void of solid Biblical backing or Scriptural reference. In the midst of all of this we find our beloved maidens, with timbrels in hand, joining in with the singers and musicians in a united effort to accompany the glorious entrance of God and King into the sanctuary.

What an awesome display of solidarity is birthed out of carrying out God-ordained assignments! Miriam was indeed a prophetess, though she allowed herself to become blinded by pride and rebellion. By the mercy of God and through repentance, she was forgiven and restored to her people. Miriam's story gives us precedence, inspiration, correction, and notes the power of repentance and forgiveness as essential for every dancer in the Christian faith.

TO BE CONTINUED...

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Rekesha Pittman